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FEATURE–HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

Relationships Between Racial Slavery, Incarceration, and Policing, Part I

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The brutal death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, while in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota, focused attention in the U.S. on the problem of racism. Black Lives Matter and other organizations helped frame subsequent protests around the relationships between racial slavery, incarceration, and policing. Our task as prison educators is to stretch toward clarity.

There is a strong parallel between the dehumanization of slaves and the dehumanization of prisoners. One way this dehumanization has been enacted was by blaming individuals for their plight with no consideration for historical context. Genocide against Indigenous Americans, racial slavery, and penitentiaries all began during the British watch, before American independence. Just as slaves were perceived as lazy and incapable, prisoners were reported to be inclined toward "universal riot and debauchery" (Freedman, E. 1981. Their sister's keepers: Women's prison reform in America, 1830-1930. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 47).

Prisons had a long history, but they were places where torture and executions took place, mostly for political prisoners. This is particularly evident in American prisons: "The penitentiary was seen as an American invention" (Hughes, R. 1987. The fatal shore. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 426). In 1773, Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail was established for everyday criminals, by Quakers who advocated it as a holding facility, to replace harsh punishments such as mutilation, staggering fines, and public humiliation (Carney, L.P. 1973. Introduction to correctional science. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 79-82). Walnut Street Jail was new, a penitentiary where criminals could repent, a quiet place. By 1776, the folks who created the jail realized the implications of their design, and they organized The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. (Teeters, N.K. 1955. The cradle of the penitentiary: The Walnut Street Jail at Philadelphia, 1773-1835. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Prison Society). In 1790 the Jail was converted into a State penitentiary. (Carney, 1973, pp. 79-82).

Again we see how the punitive penal model of the 21st century in the U.S. that tends to erase context from the consideration of the roots of crime, harkens the framework of slavery by blaming slaves as inferior—deficient in native ability, lazy, incapable. They were perceived as unable to plan or use time productively. Slaves were thought to need the structure of slavery—roofs over their heads, food in their bellies.

Despite differences between historic racial slavery and current incarceration in the U.S., there are also clear connections. The term penal servitude or indentured servitude (slavery, not based on race) was associated with penal colonies (Hughes, 1987). In 1751 Benjamin Franklin said America should send a bunch of rattlesnakes to England for every indentured servant they

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sent there. Then the American Revolution succeeded. But racial slavery did not end until after the American Civil War—when all the rules changed—but often only on paper.

> In the first years after the [American Civil] war there was a . . . vigorous effort to establish public schools, but these were for whites only. There had been no desire to provide education for blacks and no belief that they could benefit from it anyway. The feverish educational work among blacks carried on by the Freedmen's Bureau and a dozen religious and philanthropic agencies had convinced few white Southerners that blacks should be educated. [Yet it was] difficult to exaggerate the eagerness of blacks at the close of the war to secure an education. Their several conventions held in 1865 drew up resolutions requesting the states to provide educational facilities . . . . Most of the states turned a deaf ear.
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> When Florida in 1866 made special provisions for the education of blacks by imposing a tax of $1.00 on each black male between twenty-one and forty-five and 50 cents per month for each pupil, black parents seized the opportunity to send their children to school. Meanwhile . . . thousands of blacks were availing themselves of their only educational opportunity in the schools set up by the Freedmen's Bureau . . . (Franklin, J.H. 2013/1961. *Reconstruction after the Civil War*: *Third edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 107-108).

"The paradox of a democracy founded on slavery had at last been done away with" after the Civil War (Du Bois, W.E.B. 1998/1935. *Black reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. New York: The Free Press, p. 121). The cruelty of the slave time continues today. It resonated in the raw anger from Jim Crow through the Civil Rights period, and can be discerned in 21st century patterns of policing and incarceration. That continuity has been a central feature of American history to date. Confederate sentiments lost the Civil War but won the peace.

White supremacist views of blacks as unfit to be free, and later, as incapable of being fully contributing citizens, continues to inform oppressive, discriminatory educational and policing practices against Blacks today. In educational terms, slavery was an anti-education institution, and prisons in the U.S. have sometimes functioned that same way. Further, Foner used the term "halfway houses" to describe institutional transitions between slavery and freedom, such as the Freedmen's Bureau (2002/1988. *Reconstruction*: *America's unfinished business, 1863-1877*. New York: Perennial Classics, p. 56). Swint reported that there were 9,503 Freedmen's Bureau teachers in 1869 (1967. *The Northern teacher in the South*: *1862-1870*. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., p. 3). The road to equitable schooling for black communities is a history denied, despite the deep desire for education among black people since the time of slavery. This sustained racist view of blacks as inferior people to be feared and controlled, is evident in policing practices as well, as is increasingly evident through the video footage of the casual brutality of police resulting in untimely deaths of people such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Aarbery, Tamir Rice, Jacob Blake and too many others to mention here.